

“Keeping Your Head Up When the World Brings You Down”

Isaiah 64:1-12

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1st Sunday in Advent

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Legend has it that while serving as a Professor at Columbia Seminary, Walter Brueggemann was called onto the carpet of the President’s office for supposedly using too much profane language in the classroom. Apparently in the heat of talking about one of the prophets, Walter had let a succession of F-bombs fly on a day when some of the seminary’s more conservative donors happened to be on campus. The story goes that when confronted by the powers that be, Walter responded, “I’ll stop saying [fill in the blank] when the Bible stops saying it.”

Though I’ve never been able to confirm *that* story, I did hear Brueggemann say on more than one occasion that a lot of people in the church don’t have the stomach for the stuff that’s *actually* in the Bible. As a consequence, we’ve replaced what could with a dynamic faith with a domesticated one. A false faith that tries to dress everything up – including God – to meet our mannerly cultural sensibilities.

I think it’s the reason why when someone in a meeting last meet said that something “sucks” in my presence they immediately apologized as if they had committed an indiscretion. I think the person apologized not because he thinks he actually did anything wrong. He apologized because he’s been taught that the church or its “officials” need to be shielded from anything that seems profane.

The church has not only earned this reputation, we’ve actively assumed it. We’ve taken it on even in our theology, especially our theology around suffering. “God doesn’t give us more than we can handle” some Christians say. “When God closes a door, he opens a window,” others say.

Like most pithy proverbs, there’s some truth in each of these phrases, I’ll admit. It’s not bad to be reminded that faith does give strength for trying times or that the closing of one possibility doesn’t mean everything is lost. The problem is that these truisms suggest that there’s a single faithful approach when suffering comes to us. That our experience must be squished into that single approach like a sleeping bag compressed into its stuff sack. Over time, people whose suffering doesn’t fit into those categories – people who feel rage toward God, or abandoned by God, or frustrated with God – that is to say, people who experience real suffering - decide they can’t bring those feelings to the church because we can’t tolerate them.

Perhaps some have checked out of church because we haven’t offered much more than Hallmark has already delivered. It’s like the worse suffering gets, so does our theology. Even more, sometimes I worry that people miss out on the relief that unadulterated prayer offers, because they’ve confused the church’s inability to deal with our raw edges with God. They’ve learned from the church, wrongly, that God only takes prayers that sound nice.

I watched in awe Patton Oswalt’s new comedy standup routine on Netflix the other night in which he speaks very truthfully about his last year of walking through

grief from the death of his wife. Right on stage he unwraps the philosophical and theological struggles that emerge in the midst of this tragedy. The horror of having to tell his little girl that her mother had died. The struggle to make it through Mother's Day with her, two weeks after his wife's death.

I listened to him and felt sad not only for his grief but that his main idea of what religion has to offer was the phrase "everything happens for a reason," instead of Israel's dynamic faith, recorded in scripture.

Israel doesn't deal with its suffering through a sanitized, shallow, sheepish faith.

Isaiah brings a confrontation.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." "No one calls on you, God," Isaiah says, "because you've turned away from us." "Your holy cities are all ghost towns: Zion's a ghost town, Jerusalem's a field of weeds. Our holy and beautiful Temple, which our ancestors filled with your praises, Was burned down by fire, all our lovely parks and gardens in ruins.

In the face of all this, are you going to sit there unmoved, God? Aren't you going to say something? Haven't you made us miserable long enough?"¹

If you haven't ever prayed a prayer like that I'm going to suggest it's for one of two reasons. Either you haven't ever really suffered, or you haven't fully trusted. Both are barriers to faith in their own kind of way.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote that all Christians must share in the suffering of their brothers and sisters. That it is precisely in this voluntary suffering – freely sharing in this suffering – that we come to the true experience of the living God. "We must learn," he wrote, "to regard human beings less in terms of what they do and neglect to do, and more in terms of what they suffer. The only fruitful relation to human beings is love, that is, the will to enter into and to keep community with them. God did not hold human beings in contempt but became human for their sake."²

The presence of suffering becomes the window to the divine, not because God enjoys suffering or wants anyone to suffer. But because solidarity with human suffering is the very definition of divine love. It's the place where we learn what real love is.

Bonhoeffer, writing to three important friends ten years after the rise of the Nazis, just before his arrest, said that the most important experience that had come to them in the presence of so much evil was seeing the world "from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering." From there, Bonhoeffer said, we learn that "personal suffering is a more fruitful principle than personal happiness for exploring the meaning of the world in contemplation and action."³

¹ *The Message* translation.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *After Ten Years: An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943*, translation by Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt, edited by Victoria J. Barnett, (Fortress Press), 2017, p. 24.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 30-31.

Isaiah believed that his own city was suffering because of the sin of the people. God is not the author of their suffering. The people are. The city we've got is the city *we've* created. The devastation we've got is because *we* neglected the orphan, the widow, and the alien. We thought we could build a city on the backs of the poor, or at least by neglecting them. We thought our future depended on pulling the right economic levers to assist the rich, not by adjusting our society to embrace the poor. We messed up. And yet, still, Isaiah says directly to God, "you can change this, if you want to. You have the power to change all of this."

This is the essential paradox of Advent. We look for hope in the God who can arrive and judge at any day at any moment. We keep awake to watch for that God especially when the world feels like it's coming apart. We wait and hope for the God of power that Isaiah confesses – who did miraculous deeds in the past. Yet hope is found not by turning our backs on suffering as we stare off into the heavens, not by covering up suffering, not by pretending it doesn't exist, not by diminishing its pain. Hope is found in the midst of it when we're so broken down that only then are we able to receive something beyond ourselves.

I've been in some hard conversations recently about the city's violence. Listening especially to what children have gone through – the numbers of children who have witnessed significant violence, who have come to accept it as a part of normal living. It seems like daily my phone lights up with news that someone I know has been a victim of crime – across neighborhoods, across race, class, you name it. Like any compassionate, thinking person I have wanted to move quickly to solutions even when those have been hard to come by.

Several weeks ago, worn down by frustration, someone said to me, "I don't know what we need to do yet. But I do know from my past that whenever there is suffering we should move toward it. Because that's where we'll find what we're looking for."

This was true for Isaiah. It was true for the Israelites in Egypt. And it was true for the women who stayed close to the cross. The suffering itself is nothing to be glorified. Truthfully, it sucks. God is not there because God enjoys suffering. God is there because love is called for. Like a parent who shares the tears of his little girl's grief. Like a neighbor who moves toward her neighbor's suffering instead of away from it. Like the God of the universe who enters our world, getting as close as God can – into our flesh – to stomach the worst our kind can do – to love us with justice; to judge us with love.